

“Overflowing with Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

Wayne Eberly

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I love it when a parable makes sense. You don't have to be the sharpest tool in the shed for this parable to make sense. Someone owes a whole heckuva lot of money...a debt he has no way in all creation of ever paying. He begs of the king, the one to whom he is indebted. The king is merciful, relents on the punishment, and forgives the debt. In return, the one who was recently forgiven finds someone who owes him money, and instead of doing unto others as he has just had done unto himself, instead of forgiving the debt, which in comparison to his own debt is trifling, he demands full repayment and exacts punishment. Others are watching and they, “Bad form!” The king hears about it, and the rascal who would not forgive as he was forgiven is punished. Putting this story about kings and servants and debts into theological language, the lesson is this. God has forgiven us a huge amount...now do the same for others. Forgive others.

If the parable makes sense to me, to us, I think it would make sense to Peter. Peter is the one who asked the question that occasioned the parable. “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?” Peter wondered if he should forgive seven times. Jesus tells him not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. And then Jesus amplifies his answer with the parable about the two debtors.

If Peter knew his Jewish history, the parable would make a great deal of sense to him. Israel was indebted to God. The debt was measured in multiple ways. We read about one of those ways earlier this morning with the passage from Exodus. Israel had fallen into slavery, they were oppressed, and they were stuck with seemingly no hope. Then God appeared. Calling Moses through a burning bush, plaguing Pharaoh in countless ways, passing over the bloodstained doorposts of the Israelites while striking judgment on the Egyptians, parting the Red Sea and

setting them free from their slavery, Israel was indebted to God. Forty years of wilderness wanderings increased that debt as daily bread came down from heaven to fill their stomachs. And then they were given the entire Promised Land. Israel owed a lot to God. They were deeply indebted.

Not only were they indebted to God for all the good things they possessed Israel was also indebted for all the bad things they had done. God anticipated the bad things, the failures, the compromises, the shortcomings, the wicked intentions and evil actions. God anticipated all the sins that would be committed. Along with setting Israel free from bondage, God established a system of sacrifices that would assure them that God covered their sins, that God atoned for their sins, and that God forgave their sins. Considering the estimates for the number of Israelites who were set free from Egypt is somewhere north of 600,000 people, that is a whole bunch when you add up all their sins. Nevertheless, every year a goat would be prayed over by the priest, symbolically placing on the head of that goat all the sins of the Israelites, and that goat would escape into the wilderness, carrying the sins far away from the people, a clear and compelling sign that God had forgiven their sins, that God had forgiven their debts.

If Peter knew this history of the Israelites, this history of the Jews, being a Jewish person himself, the idea that you who have had something merciful done on your behalf should pass that mercy on to others would surely have made sense. It was not a novel idea. Numerous times in the Old Testament Israel is reminded that as they had once lived as strangers and aliens when they were enslaved in Egypt, and God had set them free, they should do everything in their power to welcome those who came to them now as strangers and aliens. Regarding forgiveness, which was enacted with the two goats each year on the Day of Atonement, the day when one goat was sacrificed and the other escaped into the wilderness symbolically carrying away the sins of the people, it just so happened that after that Day of Atonement had been celebrated for 49 years, for seven times seven years...hmmm, seven times

seven...that number seven is popping up a lot in our conversation this morning...on the 49th time, the seven times seventh time that they celebrated the Day of Atonement, the day when sins were symbolically forgiven, on that 49th time a trumpet would sound and all Israel would enter into a year of Jubilee, a year marked by none other than forgiving the debts that others owed you. Israel would be forgiven a huge, unpayable debt, and in turn, Israel would forgive the debts of others.

If we can understand what is truly a straightforward parable, along the lines of, “you have been forgiven a great debt, now forgive others”, it would make sense that Peter, raised and reared on the stories of the Exodus and the Atonement, surely Peter would have been able to understand the straightforward message of the parable.

But then again, Peter, who wanted to nail down how many times he should forgive others, maybe Peter would look for some wiggle room in this parable. Of course, we all owe a great debt to God. Of course, we are all deeply indebted to God. But I am one of the twelve who were chosen by Jesus to be disciples. Jesus came to my house for a sleepover. When Jesus walked on the water, I was in that boat. In fact, I got out of that boat. I walked on the water with Jesus. When he asked, “Who do you say I am?”, you know who got that answer right. When only three got to make the special trip up the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus punched my ticket. Yes, we are all indebted to God, but I’m not really on the same level as others, as everyone else. Yes, we are all sinners, we all have a ledger filled with our debts, but I have some credits to my account. Maybe, just maybe, my debt is not as big as the debt of others. Maybe, just maybe, I need less forgiving.

I’m picking on Peter because I have found within myself a desire to find some wiggle room in this parable. Maybe I don’t add up my credits and say I deserve forgiveness more than others deserve forgiveness, or that I need less forgiveness because I have been a little more faithful than others, but I know this for sure...when I have been wronged, when I have been hurt, when I have been treated poorly or

unfairly, when my feelings have been trampled underfoot, my first thought is not how much I have been forgiven by God. My first thought is how unfair this is. I got what I did not deserve. Now let me give to the person who wronged me what they do deserve, what they so richly deserve. And all the sudden this parable which makes such perfect sense when it is just a parable rubs me the wrong way.

If all we had to go on was this parable, it might always be a parable that makes perfect sense except when we don't want to forgive. When we do not want to forgive, we cast the parable aside and go about the business of being unforgiving and carrying a grudge and nursing hurt feelings and allowing relationships to be ruptured. We are able to rationalize and even forget that according to the parable, we all have been forgiven an amazing, unimaginably large amount by God. If we all we had to go by was the parable, it would be pretty easy to set the call to forgive aside. Thankfully, this parable is not all we have to go on.

When he told this parable in Matthew 18, Jesus and the disciples were in Galilee. This is near the end of his teaching ministry, his healing ministry, his Galilean ministry. At this point, when Jesus tells a parable about being indebted...deeply indebted to God...it would have stirred images of the Exodus and the Atonement, memories of manna and the milk, remembrances of the honey of the Promised Land. You could add to the debt the time of the Exile and the sweet return that was marked by shouts of joy as the Lord restored the fortunes of his people. Each of these actions of God individually and all of the actions collectively would have served to let Israel know they were deeply indebted to God. But none of these individually, and not even all of these actions collectively, could compare to the indebtedness that was about to become real to Peter, and to the twelve, to the people of Israel, to the whole world, and hopefully to each one of us.

The parable comes to an end. The parable often referred to as the parable of the unmerciful servant or the parable of the unforgiving servant, the parable comes to an end. The parable ends, and so does the

time in Galilee. Chapter 19 begins with these words, “When Jesus finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea...” In other words, Jesus left Galilee and began his journey to Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem we will come to see the great cost God will pay to forgive our debt, to forgive our sin. In the parable, the king forgives the great debt he is owed. But the parable does not allow us to see the cost to the king. Surely his kingdom is diminished by forgiving the debt, but we don't relate to the loss of the king. Powerful kings forgive debts. That is part and parcel with possessing power.

But in Jerusalem we see a king who relinquishes his power, and it costs him dearly. We see a king who relinquishes his power in order to lay down his life. The laying down of his life, the life of the king, will be the cost for the forgiveness of debt, for the forgiveness of sin. Now the forgiveness of sin is no longer linked to a parable. The forgiveness of sin is bound for all eternity to the passion of the King, to the laying down of the life of the King, to the suffering of the King. Now a story that captivates our interest, a story about a goat that escapes, carrying the sin of the people far away, now we see Jesus Christ, our King, shedding his blood as the goat that is sacrificed, and carrying our sin away, standing in our place, as our scapegoat. Now we see that our redemption has come because we were bought back at a great price. Now we see our freedom comes because Jesus has died in our place. Now we see that atonement has come because Jesus has covered our sin. Now we see that the doorpost of our house has been passed over because Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Peter...Peter...who knows how he heard this story when it was just a parable. Maybe as Peter listened, he was mapping out a strategy to find wiggle room, to compare his sin with the sin of others, to claim that he deserved more and others deserved less and Jesus, can't I put some limit on how my life will practice forgiveness? Can't I put a limit on forgiveness somewhere around seven times? Who knows how Peter

heard this story when it was just a parable? But how do you think Peter heard this story after Jesus died on the cross.

By the time Jesus died on the cross, Peter had experienced an awakening. By the time Jesus died on the cross, Peter had gone from boldly declaring he alone would stand by the side of Jesus come what may, to being the cowardly disciple who denied three times that he even knew Jesus. We don't know how big of a debt he incurred when he denied Jesus, but we do know when he heard the rooster crow, Peter wept...and wept...and wept. Peter knew his sin was not hypothetical. Peter knew his sin was not theoretical. Peter knew his sin was real. Peter knew his sin was raw. Peter's sin was no longer part of a parable. His sin was part of his person.

Knowing the magnitude of his own personal sin, coming face to face with his own crippling failure, how Peter's heart must have stirred when Jesus said that someone else in his very position, someone else with a crushing debt that could not be repaid, someone else had begged for forgiveness. And the king forgave all his sin. It was not a parable when Peter met the risen Christ in person. It was personal for Peter. His sins were forgiven. Covered. Cleansed. Washed away. White as snow. As far as the east is from the west. Peter was redeemed. Peter was bought back at a great price. Peter's sins were atoned. Peter was forgiven a great debt.

As long as we limit ourselves to a parable, we can wrestle with questions about the transaction, whether it was fair, who owes more, who owes less, should I or shouldn't I forgive. But when this parable becomes personal, when we come to see our debt in the context of the suffering of Christ, and we come to see our forgiveness as the gift of salvation that was poured out in the death of Jesus, this parable becomes less about a transaction and more about transformation.

This parable is paired with the words Paul wrote to the church in Rome, the 14th chapter of his letter. In Romans 14 we see how

transformation becomes the lasting impact of this parable on forgiveness. As a result of the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus, as a result of being bought back by Jesus at a great price, as a result of Jesus giving his life for us, Paul writes, “None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord.”

When forgiveness is couched in a parable that a wise teacher told as he traveled through Galilee, we can imagine the tone of voice Peter used, a tone that might well have been looking for some wiggle room. “How many times should I forgive?” But when forgiveness is something that possesses our lives through the passion of our King, the King who loved us so much he laid down his life on our behalf, we might well ask the same question. But now our goal is not to find wiggle room. Our goal is to offer ourselves fully to the cause of Christ. “Lord, how many times should I forgive.” And when his answer comes back with a number that seems more than we could ever fulfill, a number that does not seem humanly possible, we realize we are not limited by human possibility. We belong to the Lord. In Jesus Christ we have experienced a forgiveness that is not limited by human possibility. When we come to see that we do not live for ourselves alone, when we come to see that we live for Christ Jesus, when we come to say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ Jesus lives in me” When we come to the place where in view of God’s mercy we offer ourselves back to God, back to Jesus Christ our Lord, we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice...when the passion of Christ becomes personal for us and we realize that we do not live for ourselves, we live for Christ Jesus, then it just might be that we will learn to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us.